

Aureole

★★★★★

A New American classic relocates and revives.

By Jay Cheshes

135 W 42nd St between Broadway and Sixth Ave (212-319-1660).

Mon-Sat noon-2:30pm, 5-11pm;

Sun 5-10pm. Subway: B, D, F, V to 42nd St-Bryant Park; 7 to Fifth Ave. Prix fixe: \$84.

You have to be awfully secure to give a young upstart the spotlight in your own flagship kitchen. Charlie Palmer, auteur chef turned hospitality entrepreneur—with a dozen restaurants, branded hotels and a catering gig on a luxury cruise line—last year tapped rising talent Christopher Lee to run Aureole.

After 20 years on the Upper East Side, the restaurant that spawned an empire had begun showing its age. Besides a physical face-lift, what the place needed most was a fresh approach in the kitchen. Last month, the New American landmark relocated from an East 61st Street townhouse to a spiffy office tower in Times Square. Though Palmer remains the star up on the marquee—his cookbooks are in the windows—Aureole's new incarnation is the younger chef's show. Lee, who last made a splash at Gilt as Paul Liebrandt's short-lived replacement, is a fitting heir to the Palmer legacy. The two men share a reverence for seasonality, a knack with bold flavors and an intensely American sensibility.

The new Aureole is in "previews" for now (although I'm not sure when restaurants started getting free rides from critics and diners while they work out the kinks). While Lee's food is prime-time ready, service and pacing could certainly use some improvement (the endless waits between courses make you appreciate the 15 percent discount being offered until the September "grand opening").

With high ceilings, tall windows and a showcase wine vault, the new venue is impressive enough to win over even the most high-powered business diner. It's also versatile enough, with a casual à la carte front lounge abutting the more serious prix-fixe dining room—and an inviting bar with plenty of after-work nibbles—to lure in those without expense accounts.

Much more than the power locale, it's Lee's boisterous cooking that will fill this place. The opening menu shows off the best summer produce, thrown together in unlikely combinations that work extraordinarily well even when they seem like they shouldn't. A bracing

Almond-crusted lamb medallions with date puree and Vadouvan-curry cream



ceviche marries silky, sweet, salty, crispy and creamy—raw Japanese snapper, honeydew-and-watermelon mignonette, a shard of fried prosciutto, heart of palm, avocado cream—in a beautiful and cohesive tableau.

Lee's complex food strikes a fine balance between the big-ticket opulence of the original Aureole and the more homespun inclinations of a new generation of American chefs. A seared foie gras starter, with buttery corn bread, smoked corn coulis and fresh tart blueberries, is so wholesome and seasonal, it ought to be served outdoors on a farm. A small bowl of pasta featuring delicate artichoke ravioli doused in a velvet buttery sauce and a Cajun sprinkling of crawfish and andouille, is comfort food so flavorful, you'll wipe the bowl clean—and so extra rich, you'll be glad the portion's not bigger.

Among the dishes I tried, the high-low high-wire act went splat only once—in a poorly executed lunchtime burger with mealy tomatoes, greasy onion rings and pickled-ramp mayo that too closely resembles a certain well-known "special sauce." A new-

wave surf and turf, on the other hand, beautifully captures the chef's shabby-chic ethos, presenting side-by-side expert renditions of butter-poached lobster (meaty tail, almond foam, braised chard, chanterelles) and barbecued pork (tender glazed belly, mini gooseberries, baby zucchini). Succulent medallions of semiboneless lamb encrusted in almonds and surrounded by a seasonal bounty—sweet English peas, diced carrots, cipollini onions—also stray into the comfort-food zone, with a delicious medley of sauces (Vadouvan curry, Medjool date, intense Meyer-lemon lamb jus) in puddles around it.

Desserts by Jennifer Yee, who worked at Gilt with Lee, show remarkable continuity with the food they follow. Both sweet and savory dishes, in fact, use many of the same seasonal elements.

Cheat sheet

Drink this: Aureole's top-notch sommelier will gladly guide you through the restaurant's voluminous wine list (with 1,072 bottles). An Austrian gruner veltliner from Birgit Eichinger (\$46) is a fresh, bright match for Christopher Lee's summer menu.

Eat this: Artichoke ravioli with andouille and crawfish, foie gras with blueberries and corn bread, lobster versus pork belly, rack of lamb with date puree and Vadouvan cream, sweet-corn soufflé.

Sit here: The new Aureole offers seating options to fit every occasion. The cloistered carpeted dining room is for the most serious diners, the wide-open lounge for more casual pop-ins, the oversize bar for solo suits stealing away from the office for an on-the-fly bite.

Conversation piece: Charlie Palmer, a pioneer of New American cooking, is a hugely ambitious entrepreneur who has invested over the years in a dairy farm, a flower market, a water bottler and a Sonoma vineyard. He runs his own home-accessories store and online wine retailer and produces a signature line of knives.

While a sweet-corn soufflé with blueberry compote, a caramel smear and a salty corn chip deliciously echoes the foie gras first course, a pan-fried carrot cake slice, more savory than sweet, could as easily be served as a side dish for lamb.

The big question right now is how long Lee (a contender for *The Next Iron Chef*) and his pastry-chef acolyte (they certainly make a good team) will stick around as tenants but not owners on the New York restaurant scene. Once the economy comes back, what could possibly stop them from striking out on their own? ■

Artichoke ravioli with crawfish and andouille



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